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ABSTRACT

The relationships between the teacher, learner, and methods in second language teaching are complex, and success or failure in language learning and teaching cannot be attributed to any single factor. No method is best in an absolute sense; there are only methods that are better suited to specific situations. At present, the general trend is toward communicative approaches and a sociocultural emphasis. It is important to ensure that a method is suitable for a particular learner's, or group of learners', aptitudes, needs and interests, age and instructional level, and time available. The suitability of the method is also related to the teacher's understanding of the method, the learner, and the learning context. These factors suggest that teacher training should accommodate teachers' personal characteristics and produce teachers with knowledge of the target language, macrolinguistics, and didactics and skills in classroom management and educational technology. In addition, teacher training should be carried out using the same communicative methods the teachers are expected to use in the classroom. (MSE)

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RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN THE TEACHER, THE LEARNER AND METHODS IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING: SOME BASIC CONSIDERATIONS

F. Martin-Molero

FL 015 918

Introduction

It is obviously very difficult in only a few pages to cover all the relationships between the most important factors in Foreign and Modern Language Teaching (hereafter F/MLT): these are the teacher, the learner and the method. But in attempting this task I hope to clarify, as far as is possible, the causes of success or failure in language learning since it has frequently been attributed to one or other of them by non-specialists.

The Method has often been said to be the cause of success or failure in language teaching, as it is the method which determines the "amount of language" as well as the "how" of the language teaching. Advertising of the "con el método tal hable Inglés en tres meses" type would have us believe that the method is the most important and almost the only

decisive factor of success in language learning.

For others, the most important factor is the learner, since ultimately it is he or she who does the actual language learning, which therefore greatly depends on his or her natural ability, effort, motivation and so on. From this point of view, then, the method is not really so important, it is the learner that matters.

Yet a third approach to the problem leads to the conclusion that the cause of success or failure is the teacher, since it is the teacher who is in charge of applying the method. In themselves, methods are neither good nor bad, runs this argument, it all depends on how they are used: the teacher is entirely responsible for success or failure since in the end it is he or she who makes the method work well or badly.

In the following pages we shall try to analyse the complex relationships between the three factors involved in this problem and to show just how trivial the above arguments are.

I - Foreign and modern language teaching methods

One of the definitions of "teaching methods" given in the Encyclopaedia of Educational Research is that they "are patterns of teacher behaviour". When this is applied to F/MLT, those different patterns of behaviour are due to different theories and descriptions of language and language learning. But the meaning of the term "method" also depends on what actually happens in the classroom and on the different people using the term (administrators, teachers, researchers, text-book and materials writers, etc.). Does the term "method" apply to the quantity and selection of the language to be taught, to teaching procedures, - or to both? The relevance of Aristotle's definition (of learning) - "habitus cum ratione factivus", - needs further consideration as well; otherwise a lack of understanding of what "method" really means can only lead to endless and fruitless discussions.

The first question one needs to be able to answer in order to analyse a method for the purposes of description, evaluation or comparison is this: what are F/MLT methods? In other words, what are their essential dimensions, their most important characteristics?

Writing in 1965, Mackey identified four essential dimensions which he considered to be "inherent characteristics" of a method: these were:

1) Selection of the part of language a method intends to teach since it is impossible to teach the whole of a language. What exact amount of phonetics, morphology, syntax, vocabulary, semantics? From what type of language? For what objectives, level and duration? With what criteria?

2) Gradation of the language for teaching purposes. In what order is it going to be taught, since again not everything selected can be taught at once. How is the language structured? What are the phonetic, morphological, syntactic, lexical and semantic groupings? In what sequences, length and combinations?

3) Presentation techniques in order to communicate the language already selected and graded. Is the spoken and written language taught simultaneously or separately? If so in what order? With what spacing-stages? Is the native language used? If so, how is it used: with translation, explanations or both? If the native language is not used, what procedures does the method employ : ostensive, pictorial media, contextual? What variety and quantity of procedures?

4) Repetition to enable the learner to use the language independently. In order to achieve fluency a great amount of practice is needed in the context of communication; and in order to achieve accuracy, errors or at least a frequent appearance of them should be avoided/ prevented. And what kind of repetition is prescribed: operational, variational, rote? Does the practice integrate oral and written codes? If one, which one? And, with what variety of practice?

Even this attempt to generalise about methods clearly reflects the theories and descriptions of language and language learning which underpin it, in the same way as any specific method does. Mackey's first two items of "inherent characteristics" are based more on a view of language as the object of linguistics than as a means of communication: his second two similarly reflect the psychological principles and pre-occupa-

tions of the time. This is not to suggest that the characteristics selected by Mackey are not still of considerable importance, but it does underline the very relative nature of such attempts to analyse methods. Nowadays, most applied linguists would want to say considerably more about "the context of communication" and would be far less categorical about the importance of repetition and of avoiding errors and in so doing would be faithfully reflecting their linguistic and psychological principles and pre-occupations.

For ordinary teaching purposes it is neither necessary nor possible to develop fully all the concepts implied in this discussion of "inherent characteristics". However, in those cases where teachers decide on methods themselves (i.e. where the method is not imposed by the school) they should be capable of evaluating methods along these lines.

As we have seen, the linguistic theories and descriptions and the theories of learning which underlie F/MLT methods differ, and the methods themselves therefore differ along the four different dimensions which shape their profile (see the comparative studies of methods in Mackey, 1965; Martin, 1981). F/MLT methods can be objectively measured and evaluated, and such evaluation must precede any serious evaluation of their application, for obviously, "a method is one thing and the teaching of it quite another". As Mackey puts it, "this fallacy of evaluating methods by their results is as common as that of evaluating the teaching by the methods used".

There are many different types of F/MLT methods, but for obvious reasons we cannot analyse them here. However, a few points of general interest and validity can be made:

A good method is no guarantee of good teaching. It is no good blaming the method if the teaching is ineffective, any more than it is complaining about a good car without petrol or one which is in the hands of someone who is unable to drive it.

Good teaching is not always a guarantee of good learning either, for it is what the learners do that makes them learn. Hence the saying that "sometimes students learn in spite of their teachers".

Evaluating method in terms of teaching is thus bound to lead to erro-

neous conclusions, or to hinder serious attempts to solve the problem, or both. It is this, together with the quest for THE method, which has plunged FLT methodology research into an ocean of futile work for nearly a century. No method is best in any absolute sense. In other words, there is no such thing as the method; there are only methods which are better suited to specific situations in terms of objectives, needs, age, class size, level, time, etc.

This explains the present marked tendency to watch how students learn rather than to study how best they can be taught (Ney, 1976). For example, the 1975 TESOL (Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages) Convention in Los Angeles included a sub-section on the development of study skills in the learner and the teacher's role in this development. Similarly, the "acquisition versus learning" dichotomy is being paid special attention by those hoping better to understand the second language learning process. This is a further reason for the increasing interest in studying learner characteristics, cognitive style and behaviour in the classroom.

Experience has shown that neither theory nor methods have withstood the rigours of time and evaluation, and the general trend is now towards communicative approaches and a socio-cultural emphasis in language study (Philips, 1983; Riley, 1982; Dolle-Willemsen, Menting & Willems, 1983, etc.).

II - The Learner

It is important to ensure that a method is suitable for a particular learner or group of learners from at least the following points of view:

a) Learner's aptitudes, general intelligence, memory and attention - because of the important rôle they play in comprehension, imitative ability in speech, etc.

b) Learners' needs and interests. The method should match the learners' motives for language learning (speaking purposes, translating, reading, etc.).

c) Age and level. Age is important, since choosing an integrated me-

thod (i.e. introducing reading and writing from the very beginning) may not be at all suitable for young children. Level must be taken into account, since the method should be adapted to the student's knowledge of the target language.

d) Time available: the pace, rhythm and duration of the course are crucial, since learning to speak a language fluently and accurately requires time and practice.

As was stated above, present-day research in this field:

1. Focusses on psycholinguistics
- on how the student learns the second language, on different cognitive styles and classroom behaviour;
- on the student's interests and motives: in reality, the inclusion as far as is possible of the student in decision-making, ensures that these aspects are taken into consideration.

2. Focusses on sociolinguistics
- language teaching is seen as a means of communication emphasising the sociocultural background, which implies the systematic teaching of communicative values (see Widdowson, 1978, pp. 15-18; and Rivers, 1976, pp. 28-34).

However, we do not as yet possess a scientific theory of language acquisition and learning (Sinclair, 1978, p. 167). Bever (1970, p. 350) is also categorical in this respect: "I've said little about the effects of general principles of learning on linguistic structure because I don't know anything about how language (or anything else) is learned, while I do have some initial understanding of the mechanisms of perception". But although psychological theorizing about language learning is still in its early stages, applied linguists cannot just sit back with folded arms waiting for more advanced knowledge to design more efficient techniques and methods. Nor can we ignore the learner's right to expect that years of work in modern language teaching will have produced some useful, practical knowledge. This puts F/HL didactics in a somewhat embarrassing position as regards both its theoretical foundations and its practical applications (methods, techniques,

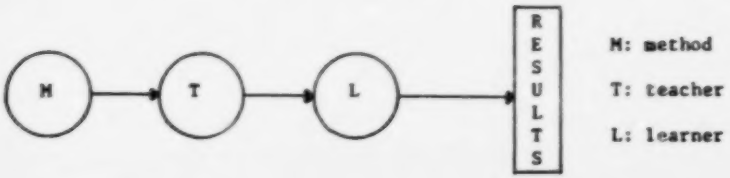
strategies, etc.).

It is becoming clear, however, that this situation is largely due to a double confusion. Firstly, most of the so-called "models of learning" proposed by psychologists are in fact no more than models of teaching i.e. accounts of how one person can influence another's behaviour; recent work on (language) learning as such ("intake" as opposed to "input") by both mainstream and humanistic psychologists has provided us with a number of positive insights into the processes concerned, which will be briefly discussed elsewhere in this book. The second confusion has been dubbed the "psycholinguistic fallacy" and it consists in psychologists and linguists mistaking their descriptive models for reality, that is, in assuming that what they note down on paper is "what happens" to or in a speaker in real life.

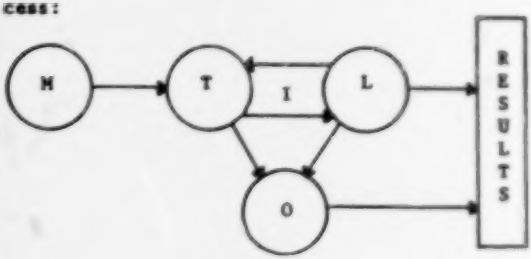
Recent work in discourse analysis and in particular the study of the learners' inter-language and of their communicative strategies both in and out of the classroom, is providing a healthy antidote to this, as well as providing considerable support for the proponents of communicative methodology.

III - The Teacher

The suitability of a method is obviously related not only to the learner but to the teacher as well: after all, the teacher is the one who handles it and to handle a method properly it is essential to know it. However, the teacher needs to know more than just how to use the method efficiently. He or she also has to know the learner (see above) and the teaching context in which the method is going to be applied. The success of an F/ML course should be seen as a matter of the interdependence between these three main factors:



In order to choose the most appropriate method in a specific teaching situation, the teacher should be capable of evaluating methods, or should be provided with reliable evaluations by experts before the actual teaching begins.
This is the only way in which the teacher or expert can make a suitable choice i.e. one which takes into account the teaching context (learners' needs, interests, levels, time, class size, etc.) and which is made in the full knowledge of what methods are in fact available.
If the teaching context permits it (age, level, needs, etc.) F/MLT objectives should be analysed/stated together with the learners so that they can participate as far as is possible in the decision making process:



O: objectives
M: method
T: teacher
L: learner
I: interaction

Teaching the learner "how to learn" is to add a most efficient dimension to the language learning process. Efficient teaching always involves facilitating or even provoking effective learning: it "focusses more and more on the learner" (Brumfit, 1976). And if the approach is a communicative one, the linguistic items will be learnt in their cultural context "thus providing not only the patterns of the language but also the trappings that make them meaningful". (Gladstone, 1969).

IV - Implications for teacher-training

The implications of the above discussion for both theory (Teacher-training models) and practice (the teacher-trainers) are obvious.
Teachers should be capable of dealing with their task efficiently within the complex framework which has been so briefly outlined. This means that in the training of language teachers, the following factors should

be taken into account.

1. Preexisting (personal) characteristics which are not a matter of training but of preselection, since there are some personality traits which influence teaching outcomes (Encyclopedia of Educational Research, 1982, pp. 1873-1915).
2. Professional characteristics which are the direct consequence of the teacher-traning curriculum, both theory and practice. "Teacher Competence" is conceived as a repertoire of knowledge and skills or "know-how".

   2.1 Knowledge of:

   a. The target language (near-native fluency and accuracy).
   b. Macrolinguistics (psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, linguistics and applied linguistics).
   c. Didactics (methods, methods analysis and evaluation, strategies and techniques for teaching interaction, etc.).

   2.2 Skills in:

   a. Classroom management.
   b. Educational technology, in both the wider and narrower senses:
      - Applying scientific principles to classroom practice;
      - Handling the audio-visual equipment of materials required by the methods to be used.

This training must itself be carried out using the self-same active methods which the teachers are expected to put into practice. However, good training will never do away with the need for regular in-service workshops, seminars and courses if we are to train efficient M/FLT professionals.

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